

Answers to Common Questions

About the Mourning Dove

Is the mourning dove a gamebird or a songbird?

The mourning dove is a gamebird. The mourning dove belongs to the family of birds called *Columbidae* (pigeons and/or doves). Birds of the family *Columbidae* (including the mourning dove) are distinctly different from songbirds because the adults feed their young “pigeon milk” a milky substance they produce in their throats. The *Columbidae* are listed as gamebirds under Chapter 481A.1 21 (e) of the Iowa Code. The *Columbidae* are also listed as a gamebird under the International Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. The Act is an international agreement between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico governing the harvest of migratory gamebirds. These treaties recognize sport hunting as a legitimate use of a renewable migratory bird resource.

How long do mourning doves live?

Expected life span about 1-year for adults. Mourning dove populations experience very high annual mortality rates; depending on geographical region, 50 – 75% of the population dies each year. Significant causes of mortality include predation, hunting, weather events, disease, and chemical toxicosis, but the nature of the interactions among these sources is not understood. For example, there is only weak evidence that hunting mortality is additive to other causes.

How many mourning doves are there?

Mourning doves ranked second to Red-winged Blackbird in occurrence on 1989 North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) routes. Among the most abundant bird species in U.S.; estimated population abundance range from 475 million to 350 million. In U.S., Iowa has some of the higher reported densities on the national Breeding Bird Survey.

What has to happen for Iowa to have a dove season?

The Iowa legislature must add the words “*mourning dove*” to Chapter 481A.48 of the Iowa Code. The DNR can only establish seasons and bag limits for game species specifically listed in Chapter 481A.48.

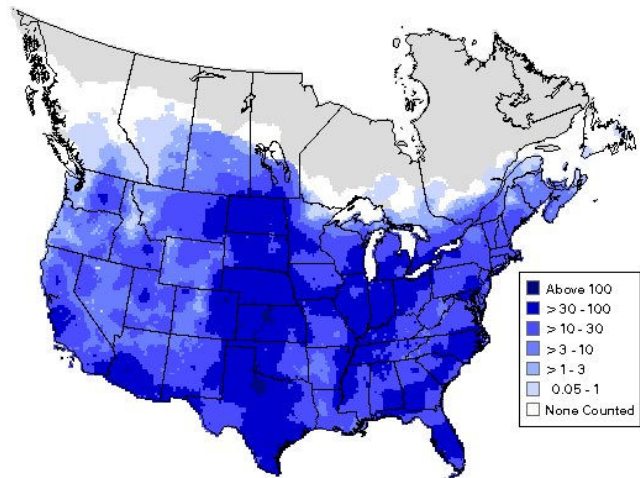


Figure 1. Mourning dove BBS distribution 1994-03, mean birds per 24.5 mile survey route.

How would a dove season be set in Iowa?

Because the dove is a migratory bird governed by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, season frameworks are established annually by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in Washington D.C. Under the international law doves may only be hunted between the dates of 1 Sept. through 15 January. Current regulations allow for a 70 day hunting season with a restrictive, moderate and liberal (8, 15, 22 bird daily bag limits respectively) adaptive harvest framework based on survey trends. Current survey trend data support the moderate bag limit. Individual states can be more restrictive with their season and harvest regulations, but not more liberal.

Does Iowa have a stable and huntable dove population?

Yes. Two surveys are used to monitor dove populations in Iowa, the FWS Call-Count survey and the Breeding Bird survey. Both surveys are run in early spring and measure the prebreeding population. The call-count survey is conducted by state and federal wildlife agencies and counts only doves, while the breeding bird survey

is conducted by birders and Audubon members and records information on all birds heard and seen. Data from both surveys indicate Iowa dove populations have remained stable over the last 4 decades.

Why do Iowa sportsmen and women want a dove season anyway?

With an estimated population of almost half a billion individuals the mourning dove is the #1 gamebird in the country. More sportsmen and women pursue doves each fall than any other small game species in the country. It is the only gamebird found in all the lower 48 states. It is also a resident species in every county in Iowa. Hunters in every state adjoining Iowa can hunt mourning doves. It's high speed and erratic flight makes it one of the toughest and most challenging upland gamebirds to harvest.

However, the main reason Iowa sportsmen and women want a season because the mourning dove is the most difficult and challenging upland gamebird to shoot.

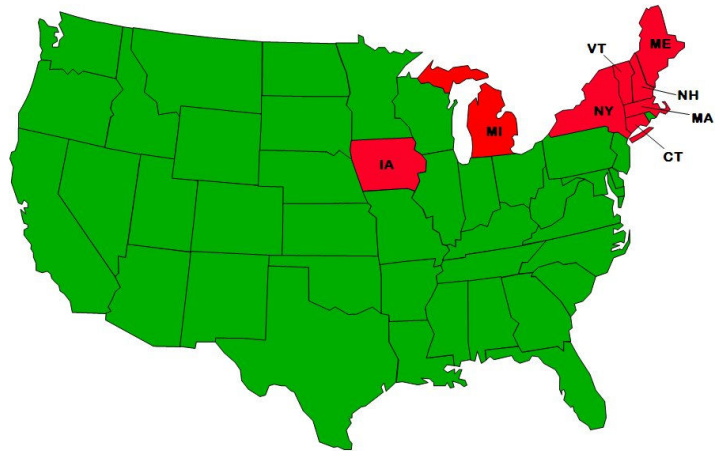


Figure 2. Map of states that allow mourning dove hunting (green) and those that do not (red) - 2010.

How many Iowans would hunt doves if Iowa had a season and what would be the economic impact?

That is difficult to answer. In states without abundant pheasant populations like Missouri and Illinois, 40-50% of small game hunters pursue doves. In other states like South Dakota and Nebraska where abundant upland game (pheasants) exist participation is lower 10-20%. Using the numbers from states that surround Iowa, we would likely expect to have about 20,000 dove hunters and harvest 300,000 birds per year. Using 2006 hunter economic spending information these 20,000 dove hunters would contribute \$6.9M to the Iowa economy, generate \$462,000 in state sales tax revenue and generate 90 jobs within the state.

Won't a hunting season reduce dove numbers?

No. Over 30 years of research has failed to show that dove hunting has any detrimental effects on dove numbers. Approximately 1 million U.S. hunters annually harvest about 17-20 million birds, which represents about 5-7% of the fall population. Doves have a high annual mortality rate. Each year 6 out of every 10 doves will die. Hunting accounts for only 1 of these 10 deaths. Disease, weather, and predators kill the other 5. Doves offset this high death rate with a high birth rate. On average a single pair of doves can produce 5 young in a single summer nesting season.

Isn't the mourning dove the biblical "olive branch" symbol of peace?

No. The North American mourning dove is not the bird involved in biblical references. The *Columbidae* (pigeons and/or doves) are a large family of birds with dozens of species worldwide. The dove referred to in the bible is likely the ring-billed pigeon found in the Middle East. The words dove and pigeon were used interchangeably in early times, and it is likely that our common pigeon is a closer relative to the biblical bird than the mourning dove.

Won't the doves that frequent my backyard bird feeder in town be more vulnerable to hunting?

No. In Ohio, researchers banded over 10,000 doves from rural and urban areas. Hunters harvested less than 1% of urban doves and less than 6% of rural doves. These results reinforce the fact that dove hunting has little impact on the population and that urban doves are less susceptible to hunting because they seldom leave urban areas.

Won't doves just be used for target practice since they're too small to eat?

No, absolutely not. Doves make excellent table fare. The desirability of a bird or animal for eating is not related to its size. If size of the game were a condition for harvest then Iowans would no longer fish for perch, bluegill, or crappie nor hunt woodcock, quail or squirrel, which all have about the same amount of meat (4oz.) as a dove. There are many more reasons for hunting doves than the amount of meat alone. The dove is the #1 gamebird in the country because it is very difficult to shoot in flight. The dove is a prized gamebird because it is not an easy target.

The target shooting of game species is a prohibited act in the Iowa Code under two separate laws, the birds as target and the wanton waste laws (Chapters 481A.21 and 481A.137). The birds as target law carries a fine, surcharges, and court costs of \$63 and the wanton waste of game in Iowa carries a fine of \$182 plus an additional charge of \$100 for each animal left in the field.

Won't hunters simply shoot them off the telephone wires or buildings?

No. Doves may sit on wires and buildings if you watch them from a distance, but seldom let you approach close enough to shoot. Iowa also has laws on the books that prohibit both of these acts. Shooting at telephone wires is considered reckless use of a firearm and with property damage (shot wires, insulators, or buildings) carries a maximum fine of \$5,000 and 2 years in jail. Discharging a firearm within 200 yards of a building occupied by humans or livestock carries a fine of \$63 per offense.

Should the mourning dove be hunted in Iowa? - An issue of personal choice.

The decision whether or not to hunt is one of those personal matters that has always been left up to the individual Iowans. Hunting game species has never been prohibited in Iowa unless there were strong biological reasons to restrict hunting. Regulated hunting will not reduce dove numbers in Iowa nor will it reduce the non-hunters opportunity to view and enjoy doves. Hunters are not trying to force their behavior upon non-hunters. Hunters have no argument with the philosophy of folks opposed to hunting. They may not agree with them, but they do not insist on regulations requiring them to see things their way and go hunting. Yet, in effect, this is what the non-hunter is doing. They are disregarding all the facts, and telling the Iowa hunters and landowners to adhere to my beliefs as a non-hunter that mourning dove should not be hunted. In this case there is no compelling reason for preferring one belief to the other. The decision to hunt or allowing people to hunt on private land is an individual's choice with all game species in Iowa except one, the mourning dove.

Websites with helpful information:

The Birds of North America Online - <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/117/articles/demography>

North American Breeding Bird Survey - <http://137.227.242.23/bbs/bbs.html>

USFWS Migratory Bird Mgmt - <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/NewsPublicationsReports.html>